

Fasten your seat belts

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

When I tested positive six-years ago, my life was a shambles. Bob left me, I was an out of control sex addict dialing 976 every night for home delivery tricks, and was substitute teaching for some of the worst public schools in South Central and East L.A.

I was spiritually bankrupt, my life hit bottom and I was lonely as hell. My only friend Alan had been brutally stabbed by some street trash and left for dead in a pool of blood, yet I couldn't stop driving down Santa Monica Boulevard at three in the morning, acting like some horny, drunk straight boy, with my big dick whipped out, pretending I didn't know those crystal-tweaking hustlers were working. I'd lure them in, but when I wouldn't pay them, they'd take my car keys or flash a knife until I did. Desperate, I went to

hear Marianne Williamson speak on the channeled spiritual text *A Course in Miracles* because she was attracting a large HIV following. She fired me up so fiercely that I couldn't consume the dense text fast enough. I took days off my grueling teaching job so I could read more chapters until something inside my head began to snap.

In my dad's library is a dusty old book on the life of the Rev. Felix De Andreis and his missionary work in the pioneer territory of the Louisiana Purchase in the late 1700s. He had become a mysterious family legend, es-



Columnist Robert De Andreis

pecially after he was slated to be canonized for sainthood, but declined because only two, not the required three, miracles had been attributed to him. One dry night, when the madness of the Santa Ana winds howled through the hills, I thought I heard Felix, telling me I needed to visit his gravesite in St. Louis and receive his blessing for the difficult AIDS ordeal ahead.

The next day I called

school and said I needed time off because of a death in the family. I didn't tell them that the death happened 300 years ago. Dressed all in black, with no luggage, I took a cab down to the Greyhound station. Soon I was traveling across small town-America, not eating or sleeping, just obsessively reading *A Course in Miracles*. My goodness, I thought, as we drove past the scorching flatlands of

Utah, I hope I didn't leave the iron on!

I arrived in St. Louis and called the Archdiocese for information on Felix. Apparently a De Andreis Seminary and De Andreis High School had been torn down 20 years ago, and his gravesite was way out of town. I called a friend in Manhattan who let me stay with her a few days until we could figure a way to get me back home. My money ran out, I was out of my fucking mind and I needed to get back to L.A. I was finally able to borrow money for a ticket and took a spectacular train ride home. But when I got back to L.A., everything crashed and I had a sinking feeling about what had just happened. Maybe this wasn't some big spiritual quest, maybe I wasn't going to be an avatar for all that brilliant pre-millennium enlightenment, maybe I had simply lost my mind again, despite swearing that it could never happen again.

Reluctantly, I made an appointment with a psychiatrist. I knew I had to face something that I'd been in denial about all my adult life. I had a genetic mental illness hidden in the family

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tree. Manic depression, or bipolarity, devastated much of my twenties. I would self-medicate with crystal, coke and coffee, never wanting to admit the heartbreaking fact that something was chemically wrong with my brain.

My biggest fear about taking Lithium was that it would turn me into a zombie and put a damper on my creativity. But I knew in my heart that if I was going to get through the next several years battling AIDS, I was going to have to be the most grounded I've ever been. I've been on Lithium now for six years and I could never write these intense weekly columns so consistently if it wasn't for the medication. It didn't squelch my creativity, it harnessed it.

Weeks later I found *History of the Archdiocese of*

St. Louis. My heart pounded. There was a whole chapter on my enigmatic relative Felix! It turns out that he heard voices that led him to the wild "frontier," was known as a visionary religious mystic and beloved poet, able to inspire and heal. He was frail and given to melancholic bouts of "taking to his bed." He, too, had all the classic signs of this mental disorder, but was at a time when these traits could be channeled with grace, not disgrace.

In my late teens and early twenties, I was locked away a few times, survived and rebuilt my life. Adversity builds strength. Today, medical and emotional stress still trigger my mood swings — you see it in my writing over time. Ironically, AIDS has been

the catalyst for my mental and spiritual healing and Lithium has been a true miracle for me, perhaps the third one required for my relative's sainthood.

Shortly after the whole experience, I landed my first full-time teaching job as a fifth grade teacher at a Catholic school near my house. You'll ever know the emotion that swept over me each morning as this former bad boy would say, "Good morning, class," and a bunch of uniformed kids with eager, smiling faces would answer in unison, "Good morning, Mr. De Andreis."

Robert De Andreis gives a free reading and talk at Metropolitan Community Church (150 Eureka St.) 1 p.m. June 3.